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CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION, POLICY, AND STRATEGY*

Jonathan D. Pollack

December 1980

Since the fall of 1976, China's military leadership has initiated the first sustained reappraisal of its military force structure and defense strategies and policies in close to twenty years. This essay will briefly assess these recent policy changes and their potential consequences. Our objectives are four-fold: (1) to identify the political, military, strategic, and economic context of these changes; (2) to explore the areas of particular concern to the military leadership; (3) to evaluate how far-reaching the possibilities for policy change might actually be; and (4) to consider the potential implications of these changes for China's overall political and military role in East Asia during the 1980s.

The Policy Context

The past ten years have witnessed a profound realignment in the diplomatic and security strategies espoused and pursued by the People's Republic of China (PRC). In a negative sense, the quantity and quality of Soviet forces arrayed against China has grown appreciably. The USSR now deploys a large portion of its military assets in East Asia and the Pacific. These comprise elements of all the major military sectors, including air, naval, and ground forces as well as the strategic nuclear forces. While not all of these forces are directed exclusively against China (some, for example, are deployed to counter U.S. strategic and naval deployments), there is little doubt that many such units are oriented against the PRC. At the same time, China faces new security problems to the south in the context of the pronounced deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations, including the fighting of a destructive border war in early 1979. More generally, there has been an overall

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Soviet effort to encircle and "contain" China both politically and militarily, thereby attempting to make Beijing (Peking) more pliant or accommodating to Soviet power.

In a positive sense, however, Chinese decisionmakers can point to a number of highly encouraging trends. After almost a decade of intermittent negotiation, full diplomatic relations with the United States were achieved in late 1978. This normalization of relations has had four principal consequences for Chinese security planning. First, by removing the United States as an overt military threat to China, it has made irrelevant for the foreseeable future any need for PRC defense planners to deal with the contingency of a two-front war involving both superpowers. Second, Sino-American normalization has made past Chinese anxieties about U.S.-Soviet "collusion" against China either negligible or non-existent. Third, increasing security ties to the West has furnished the PRC with greater protection from Soviet political and military pressure; it has also reduced the likelihood of a Soviet surprise attack on China. Fourth, but by no means least, enhanced economic and technological ties to the West offer the possibility of achieving major breakthroughs in industrial and defense modernization in coming years. This process could well allow the Chinese their first major access to advanced foreign defense technology since the waning years of a close Sino-Soviet relationship two decades ago.

More broadly, these trends have developed at a time of extraordinary internal political transformation within China. The death of Party Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) in September 1976, the subsequent ouster of the "gang of four," and the corresponding rise to political preeminence of Party Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-p'ing) has created an atmosphere more conducive to political, economic, and institutional change than at any point in the past several decades. The dominance of leaders who are generally deemed pragmatic in their overall approach to politics and economics has become increasingly evident. These leaders appear intent upon ridding China of its past reliance on outmoded or dogmatic practices and policies. Their predominance has also given great encouragement to those in the military ranks who are eager to pursue major changes within the Chinese armed forces.

Notwithstanding these overall choices, Chinese defense planners are also preoccupied with specifying particular military priorities in various areas of need. China's recent attention to military modernization encompasses significant efforts in all key areas of the PRC's force posture. These include the ground forces, air forces, naval forces, strategic weapons program, and a set of overlapping issues pertaining to command, control, communication, and intelligence. Each of these levels presupposes a divergent set of budgetary, technological, industrial, and manpower needs, yet specifying these requirements and garnering leadership consensus on the relative order of priorities is far more difficult and potentially divisive.

Modernization, however, encompasses more than the introduction of more advanced technologies into Chinese military units and defense industries. The military leadership is also confronted with pressing issues of institutional reform. A major effort is underway to inject new ideas, to devise more effective approaches to military thought and organization, and to recruit or advance new (and younger) leaders into the decisionmaking process. The stagnation and divisions long evident within the armed forces find China lagging seriously behind both adversaries and friends in this process. Deng Xiaoping has frequently referred to the need for China's leaders to "emancipate the mind,"

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thereby helping overcome the rigidification in institutional thought and practice, so pervasive within the armed forces and elsewhere over the past two decades. Here and elsewhere, an effective, realistic approach to institutional modernization must be based on a long-term approach to rectifying organizational deficiencies.

No matter how novel these recent policy changes might first appear, in central respects they reflect issues which have preoccupied China's military leadership for much of the past three decades. There is an enormous continuity in Chinese discussions and debates of the last thirty years related to the acquisition and use of modern arms. At the risk of some oversimplification, these deliberations have involved five key questions. First has been *what to acquire*--the "mix" of military forces, and in what specific defense sectors. Second has been *how much*--the size of a modern military force which China's security needs require. Third has been *how quickly*--the degree of priority and the speed of development for military needs. Fourth has been *by what means*--the degree of external assistance versus indigenous development, and the additional choice between purchases from abroad as opposed to production at home. Fifth (but by no means least) has been *for what purposes*--the more particular political objectives to be served by acquiring and employing modern arms. These five questions comprise an enormously complicated set of issues. Moreover, such issues defy conclusive resolution at any particular moment, and instead must be addressed on a recurrent basis.

Constraints on Policy Change

Considerations of space preclude a detailed examination of the historical record pertaining to the overall defense policy agenda. What we can briefly consider, however, are various considerations and constraints which tend to both limit and direct the possibilities for future policy change. Stated differently, no matter how strong the impetus for organizational change might first appear, what is known about institutional, structural, and historical factors which might impede an abrupt or extensive transformation of China's armed forces?

The first consideration concerns size. The PRC's defense effort has hardly been negligible to date. In numbers of men in uniform, the quantity of deployed weapons systems, and absolute budgetary expenditure, China's military forces are already among the world's largest and most costly. In absolute terms, China maintains the world's largest complement of ground forces, the third largest navy and air force, a modest but growing array of strategic nuclear forces, an armed militia in excess of seven million, and an indigenous defense industrial system whose production capacities rank among the world's largest. No matter how one judges the technological and organizational of these forces, they reflect a very considerable organizational and budgetary effort. Sheer size does not preclude extensive change, but it tends to limit the scope and magnitude of a modernization effort.

The second consideration concerns the degree of autonomy in Chinese security planning. In a broad political sense, the PRC is independent of any other state's control. When the Chinese discuss security arrangements with external powers, they speak almost exclusively about coalitions or united fronts; they do not speak about alliances. At the moment, in terms of formal alliance commitments, the Chinese maintain only one: the 1961 treaty of alliance with Pyongyang. As a result, China has neither a large group of states from which Beijing can expect outright assistance or formal security guarantees, nor are the Chinese for their part obligated to proffer assistance to others. At the same time, China's armed forces are almost wholly independent in terms of their sources of equipment. As noted previously, there is a very large defense industrial system in the PRC, even if its technological base is increasingly outmoded. It nevertheless remains a very significant accomplishment for a less-than-fully industrialized state. No Chinese decisionmaker would be prepared to mortgage this degree of autonomy unless the gains and guarantees are very great and all but certain to be met.

A third set of constraints concerns the doctrines governing China's use of military power, the nature of the decision process responsible for formulating such policies, and the identity of many of the key leaders involved in such decisions. With respect to the first

consideration, there is only scattered evidence of what one might term "transplanted" military doctrine. The preponderance of Chinese defense policies have been devised in light of indigenous experiences. More importantly, many of these approaches have not only worked well in the past, but continue to demonstrate relevance in light of China's present or foreseeable political and security circumstances. For example, it is clear that the Chinese have been prepared to live with a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty in their security planning that many in the West would find intolerable or overly dangerous. Visitors to China have been struck by what is deemed the low level of Chinese military preparedness in the face of the USSR's mobilization of a far more impressive array of forces. In light of China's geographic and economic circumstances, however, it is not at all clear whether (or how) adoption of a set of "quick fix" acquisition policies would measurably enhance China's security from external attack or reduce more general political and military pressure directed against the PRC.

Indeed, when one examines what is publicly conveyed about China's military modernization effort, it remains very difficult to describe the nature of current debates over defense doctrine in any detail, let alone the overall choices in defense strategy. We can contrast this situation with China's three other "modernizations" where a far more extensive and detailed picture emerges of policy and program objectives. No doubt this difference in part reflects the sensitivity of questions of national defense policy. More broadly, however, it suggests a degree of uncertainty about how the Chinese will proceed in various areas of military concern, and (quite possibly) disagreement within the military elite over the extent to which China should disown its previous defense practices and beliefs. Such disagreements or inhibitions suggest that evidence of organizational innovation may be more gradual than many observers expect.

An incremental approach to military modernization is further suggested by the leadership characteristics of those at the highest levels of the military command structure. The preponderance of key leaders are aged men. While an effort is now underway to bring younger leaders into positions of increasing responsibility, the

results of this effort remain tentative at best. Thus, the dominant leaders represent "military generations" who are either resistant or uncomprehending about the need to introduce substantial policy change. The question of who will be able to generate significant pressure for such change may not be settled until the actuarial tables fully catch up with China's senior generals over the next ten to fifteen years.

A fourth constraint limiting organizational change concerns China's level of scientific, technological, and economic achievement. In terms of the industrial, technological, and manpower base upon which any military modernization effort must draw, China (at least in relative terms) remains a poor society. (For example, U.S. government analysts estimate the PRC's present *per capita* gross national product at approximately \$440.) What China's armed forces will be able to achieve will thus be very much affected by the degree and nature of external assistance, and by the extent of China's economic progress at other levels. Even assuming considerable success at these levels, it is not wholly certain that China's available manpower base will be capable of fully utilizing a significant infusion of advanced military technology from abroad. Given the magnitude and complexity of China's defense needs over the next decade, the Chinese may have to modulate the scope and pace at which more advanced defense technologies are integrated into existing defense plants, not to mention actual weapons systems.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, the Chinese approach problems of national security from a perspective that is as much political or even psychological as it is based upon the acquisition of modern military power. China's security needs do not seem driven by a technological imperative. Even assuming that selected decisionmakers argue for such an approach, they would nevertheless have to acknowledge that China is (and will remain) a weaker, more vulnerable state. Yet weakness can be turned to China's advantage. The Chinese understand only too well that a highly political approach to both war and peace can work to good effect. One need look no further than the American military threat to the PRC, which over the course of the 1970s was removed without Beijing having to fire so much as a shot.

The Sino-Soviet confrontation offers suggestive and intriguing parallels in this regard. While the confrontation is both very real and very costly, no major outbreak of hostilities has occurred over the past decade, and the acute military tension existing ten years ago has been significantly reduced. Yet the order of battle on the Sino-Soviet border is no more "balanced" today than it was early in the 1970s; if anything, the relative disparities between Chinese and Soviet military power are greater than they were a decade ago. As with the American threat of decades past, China will seek to manage and ameliorate the present and future Soviet threat by a preponderantly political approach to strategy. While not ruling out the military component, competition geared unduly to the latter realm represents a conflict dynamic that China cannot realistically expect to win.

Chinese Defense Doctrine

Our brief review of the varied constraints limiting policy change suggests that many of China's present practices in national defense are likely to persist in the future. Thus, much (if not all) of what the Chinese can achieve over the next decade will reflect current strategies and policies. China's military leaders now refer regularly to the need to plan for "people's war under modern conditions." They further insist that China's acquisition and use of arms is solely for defensive purposes. Such assertions are hardly surprising, but are they a reasonable guide to Chinese thinking and actions? A closer examination of Chinese behavior over the past three decades reveals a somewhat more complicated picture. Chinese conceptions of defense are flexible and somewhat expansive, in that they enable pursuit of defensive objectives, but with numerous military actions being offensive in conception and execution. By briefly exploring the underlying purposes served by China's acquiring and using modern military power, a fuller and more accurate sense of the likely choices and directions in Chinese policy begins to emerge.

The first category in China's military doctrine is *deterrence*, in particular nuclear deterrence. Chinese approaches to deterrence in critical respects parallel much Soviet thinking on this question.

There is an obvious belief that war, even in the most "unthinkable" of categories, is far less likely to occur if a serious commitment is demonstrated to use all available weapons, even on Chinese soil. Though China's nuclear forces remain primitive and far smaller than the forces China would encounter in any hypothetical Sino-Soviet nuclear exchange, their war-fighting function is inextricably linked to their deterrence function. By communicating a willingness to use such weapons (if only in retaliation), the Chinese have sought to convey an impression (and hopefully induce a perception) of steadfast resolve for China's populace as a whole as well as for any potential adversaries. The underlying logic evident in the development of such forces should not only continue unabated in the 1980s; it could well be strengthened. Thus, the advocates of a somewhat larger, more varied, and technologically sophisticated nuclear force posture may well succeed in gaining a somewhat higher priority within the defense allocation process during the coming decade.

The logic of deterrence, however, also includes the frequently maligned and still imperfectly understood doctrine of people's war. Though such a mass mobilization strategy is at the opposite end of the technological and manpower spectrum, its underlying precepts closely parallel those associated with Chinese approaches to nuclear deterrence. Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai) suggested in 1973 that no adversary dared risk total war with the PRC, since China was "too tough a piece of meat to chew," and events since that time have in all likelihood strengthened this conviction. Given that the actual costs of maintaining defense readiness at this level are modest, it is doubtful that Chinese military planners will soon or lightly discard this particular element of their deterrence thinking.

The second principal category of Chinese military thought concerns *defense*, or (somewhat more specifically) territorial defense. This issue has great significance to the Chinese, given that it pertains directly to remembrance of China's vulnerability to encroachment and imperialist penetration over the past century and a half. A "never again" mentality pervades Chinese thinking at this level; absolute success is less important than that the good fight is fought.

Thus, protection of China's territorial boundaries, waters, and air space demonstrates a determination to render China's borders inviolable. Even if one does not have to fight, domestic resolve will be correspondingly strengthened. The fact that any encroachment on Chinese soil, air space, or territorial waters over the past decade have been sporadic and hardly the prelude to more aggressive designs confirms the utter necessity of China undertaking such preparations. At the same time, the defensive, protective nature of Chinese military deployments at this level conveys military restraint and a defensive intention on the part of the PRC. Yet it is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from a people's war strategy: it is hardly a case of "luring the enemy in deep" or "trading space for time."

The third level of Chinese military preparation is *assertion*. It is offensive in both design and execution, since it is aimed at seizing disputed territory quickly, decisively, and with little or no warning. This approach can also be described as a *fait accompli* strategy. In this realm, the Chinese seek to gain the upper hand by the overwhelming exercise of force in an area where they have already achieved local predominance of power. By such means, China can secure particular disputed territories so as to render further negotiation with other interested parties wholly irrelevant. The importance of Chinese military efforts in this area grew appreciably in the 1970s, and was compellingly demonstrated in the PRC's seizure of the Paracel Islands in January 1974. Given increasing concern over control of offshore resources and China's growing rivalry with Vietnam, there seems little doubt but that the PRC will make continued (and perhaps larger) military efforts in this area in the coming decade.

The fourth category of Chinese military effort is *demonstration*. Mao Zedong once suggested that "China on occasion likes to make a loud noise." While this assertion may seem somewhat flippant, it reveals an acute understanding of the political effect of specific military actions. What Beijing termed the "limited defensive counter-attack" against Vietnam in early 1979 is very revealing of such Chinese thinking. While local tensions no doubt existed along the Sino-Vietnamese border, there was little if any danger of the outbreak of a wider war.

There can be little doubt that Chinese decisionmakers chose to escalate these tensions in a major way. By demonstrating a willingness to use a large number of forces, and (in view of then newly-formulated Soviet treaty commitments to Vietnam) in the face of considerable risk of further escalation, Beijing made its repeated political warnings wholly credible.

By the timing and scale of their actions (and by unambiguously demonstrating their willingness to cross internationally recognized boundaries), the Chinese established a set of precedents for any subsequent military actions. The specific military tasks were achieved by attacking in considerable strength, absorbing substantial casualties in the process, but by continuing actions until specific tactical objectives were achieved. The clear guideline for Chinese commanders was to cease military activity and withdraw Chinese military forces as soon as was practicable, but not in a way as to suggest that one might never return. By leaving enough forces in place in nearby Chinese provinces and by periodically voicing threats to invade Vietnam a second time should Hanoi prove recalcitrant in the face of Chinese punishment, a recurring political message is conveyed. Indeed, there can be little quarrel that the message has not only been conveyed but also received. Since the border conflict, Vietnam has redeployed many of its best combat units to the country's northernmost provinces, thereby tying up some of Hanoi's most significant military assets on an indefinite basis. While many observers argue that China failed in its effort "to teach Vietnam a lesson," the Vietnamese order of battle suggests a contrary conclusion. Such redeployments would not have occurred in the absence of the Chinese assault across the border. Indeed, the fact that China attacked in such strength (various estimates range over 200,000 troops crossing into Vietnam, not to mention additional support and combat forces deployed to China's southernmost provinces) clearly helps justify the continued existence of large ground forces in the PRC. Without the existence of such large forces, China's Vietnam engagement would have proved far more problematic to execute.

The fifth category of potential military effort, but one from which the Chinese have thus far abstained, is *expansion*. Expansion is

the realm of what Beijing calls "superpower behavior." It represents the forbidden fruit which great powers find so tempting, but for which the burdens are considerable and the rewards far from certain. In declaratory policy and in China's present capabilities and actions, China has not ventured into this overall realm. The hallmarks of such an "acquisitive" approach to grand strategy are readily observable. They include: extensive armed forces deployed abroad, often on a more or less permanent basis; extensive alliance commitments and obligations; oceangoing navies; and logistic capabilities to distant locations. All such characteristics can be subsumed under the heading of "global reach."

Whether and how China might ultimately begin to assume such a role is an enormously complicated question, and well beyond the scope of this essay. In critical respects, such a "to be or not to be" question has yet to require conclusive assessment on the part of China's leaders. China's present industrial, technological and military capacities simply do not allow for pursuit of such policies, or at least not on the grand scale associated with the United States and Soviet Union since the Second World War. The test will occur as China's industrial and military might begins to grow appreciably. Indeed, it is already apparent that the Chinese approach this question with considerable ambivalence. Beijing, for example, harangues both the Soviet Union and the United States for their global conduct, though Moscow is now deemed "the far more dangerous superpower." At the same time, however, the Chinese leadership clearly expects the United States to fulfill precisely such a role in global and Asian politics. This seeming contradiction suggests that the Chinese may not be all that troubled by various states assuming a global power role, provided there is more than one "player" in such a game. In the context of China's present circumstances and foreseeable political and economic tasks over the next decade, it is difficult to believe that China will soon or suddenly begin to practice such a role. Nevertheless, this issue will continue to require close attention for analysts and policymakers alike.

Some Concluding Observations

This brief inquiry into China's defense concepts, programs, and practices has sought to demonstrate the pivotal significance of modern military power in the PRC's security and foreign policy planning. Heightened attention in the 1980s to military modernization in all its forms can only further solidify this role. Yet defense modernization is only one among a number of pressing economic and organizational priorities. Viewed in a broader policy context, it seems highly likely that significant improvements in China's military proficiency and capabilities will occur, but on an incremental rather than dramatic basis. China's leaders are now seeking not so much to "race against time" in the military field, but rather to buy time by deferring for the immediate future any undue investment in defense construction. By focusing initially in the requirements of overall national economic development, the Chinese hope to be able to acquire and deploy more modern military forces, but only after a series of more basic industrial, agricultural, and technological goals are achieved.

If the PRC is to succeed in this effort, then China must be able to secure what is termed "a long-term peaceful international environment" within which to pursue economic modernization in relatively untrammelled fashion. This will require close links to Japan and the West in the area of technological and economic assistance; it also has greatly accelerated the building of a security relationship (at least at a political-institutional level) with the United States. This overall goal may also be used to justify a moderation of the Sino-Soviet competition, in order to not overly drain development resources into the defense area. Indeed, the Chinese continue to assert that the principal Soviet threat to international security is found in various regions of instability (such as Southwest Asia), rather than directly against China.

No matter the extent to which the Chinese might succeed in stabilizing their security environment, a long-term interest clearly exists to upgrade their defense establishment. External assistance will clearly be a central element in improving their defense industrial potential over the next decade. It is inconceivable, however, that the PRC will import large quantities of weapons from abroad. The

Chinese force posture is too large; the budgetary funds are clearly insufficient; and the trained manpower are not available for a major, rapid infusion of advanced weaponry to be successfully absorbed. Nevertheless, there may be a limited infusion of certain weapons which would have immediate relevance to particular military needs and which could be readily introduced into the present force posture--for example, anti-tank weaponry. More generally, China will seek to gain access to advanced techniques and technologies which can gradually be introduced into their present defense industrial system. In other words, what the Chinese will achieve over the next ten to twenty years will depend mainly on what they are able to produce for themselves, albeit with substantial assistance from abroad.

Nevertheless, in overall terms China's security strategy will remain very heavily focused on the political, diplomatic, and psychological elements of statecraft. They will refine many of their present military policies rather than discarding them outright. In the context of East Asian politics, the PRC seems highly unlikely to soon or suddenly destabilize the regional security environment. The Chinese have an obvious and increasing stake in long-term, positive relations with the West and Japan. To this extent, Deng Xiaoping and his likely successors will seek to mute their differences with their newfound friends in the non-communist industrialized world. To the extent that the Chinese regard other issues as more immediately pressing (in particular countering the further expansion of Soviet power), the Chinese interest in maintaining the *status quo* vis à vis the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan is also likely to increase.

